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Five Good Short Books on China: A Guide for Readers with Limited Attention Spans

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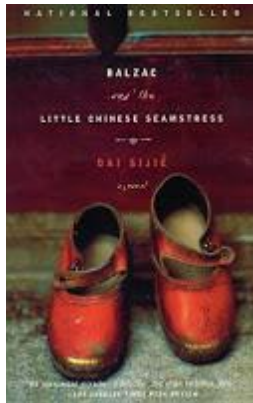
January 15, 2008 in [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

This list is for an imaginary couple who are about to take their first trip to China and have made it clear to me that they only have a limited amount of time to spend reading up on the country in advance. Or, perhaps better yet, they've been honest enough to tell me that they won't start to read up on China until their plane actually takes off, and they want some ideas of what to cram into the limited space of their carry-on bags. Though busy, these imaginary friends (I do have real ones, but none that have asked me to do precisely this) are intellectually curious, so they want to be exposed to varied aspects of China, and while mostly concerned with the present and very recent past, they are willing to go back about a century in time on the page.

Here's the list I've prepared for them (with a bit of explanation—also kept short for this era of limited attention spans):

1. [The True Story of Ah Q](#)

China's greatest modern writer (Lu Xun), telling a dark but also comic tale linked to a major event in Chinese modern history (the 1911 Revolution) in only 68 pages. Need I say more?



2. [Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress](#)

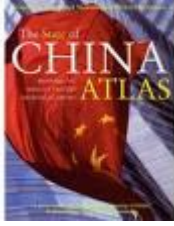
Dai Sijie's elegantly written 176 page coming-of-age tale set during the Cultural Revolution.

3. [The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Family](#)

A stylish piece of illuminating ethnographic writing by Margery Wolf; provides many insights into kinship and gender in a mere 147 pages.

4. [Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents](#)

A bit long for this list, coming in at 272 pages, but editor Timothy Cheek manages to put a lot of important material into this slim paperback, including samples of Mao's own writings and some scholarly takes on the Chairman (full disclosure: one of the scholars is named Wasserstrom), plus provide a quick tour of Chinese history from 1893 through 1976 (the years of his subject's life)—and he nicely steers clear of either demonizing or romanticizing the Chinese leader.



5. The State of China Atlas

Cultural studies specialist Stephanie Donald and political scientist Robert Benewick's map-filled and graph-packed overview of a wide range of features of contemporary Chinese society—a nice 128 page primer on what's been going on in the PRC since Mao's death.